'I saw it sale FIRST!

Sales – don't you just love them? If you want to avoid rash decisions and make sure you leave the shops with the best trend pieces that really suit your shape, read on... By Afsheen Shaikh



'Thanks to my rugby training, I did really well in the sales this year'

Sharpen your elbows girls, the January sales are upon us. On the positive side it's a chance to bag that winter coat you've had your eye on for three months. But there are pitfalls aplenty – impulse buys, maxing out your credit card and sore feet to name but a few. There's something of an art to sale shopping and our experts are here to help you hone your technique before you're let loose with your purse.

1 Think before you buy

Snapping up cut-price clothes gives you a buzz, admittedly, but heed rule number one – it's better to make considered choices. 'It's a good time to pick up bargains, but don't go for trendy items that will last you only a few weeks into the New Year,' says Audrey Hanna of image consultancy Colour Me Beautiful. 'You should be looking for classic investment pieces, like coats, jackets, trousers, skirts, and suits that are timeless.' Don't head straight for the 'final reductions' rail – these are pieces that are worth spending a bit more on.

2 Be realistic

We've all got sale items in our wardrobes that we're planning to slim into, right? It's all too easy to be tempted into parting with our hard-earned cash for something that's gloriously within our price range, but totally not the right size or style for us. Don't! You won't ever wear them

and it's a waste of good money that could have gone towards something useful.

'To make the most of the bargains you need to be very disciplined,' advises Health Plus resident image coach Sue Donnelly. 'Make a note of exactly what you want to buy and don't waiver from it otherwise the budget goes through the roof.' In other words, if you have your heart set on a classic coat, that's what you buy – not the skirt you've just noticed hanging on the rail at half-price. Also steer clear of bargains that are 'damaged' and uncomfortable to wear.

3 Buy clothes to suit your shape

Apple

You're full around the middle, with a larger bust, narrow hips and slim legs.
Do go for v-necked or ruched tops to show off your cleavage and draw attention away from a thick waist. Go for simple and structured fabrics, avoiding clingy ones.
Don't cover up a big belly under smocks and tunics – you'll only draw attention to what you're trying to hide! Choose flat-front skirts and trousers, and avoid pleats.

Pear

There's one important rule to remember if you've got big hips and a shapely bottom – make the most of your slim top.
Do boost your bust with clever undies and tailored tops, and wear neutral coloured slinky separates on your bottom half, like pencil skirts and pinstripe trousers.
Don't go for fitted or cropped styles and avoid horizontal stripes, or thin, clingy fabrics.

Curvy

If you've got an hourglass figure, celebrate your voluptuous boobs and bum with good tailoring.
Do choose tailored trousers to elongate legs and lift your bum, and pick out eye-catching accessories like a great waist-defining belt.
Don't wear tight, plunging tops. Emphasise your bust, but don't let it take over! Also avoid baggy layers and frumpy clothes which will just swamp your shape.

Athletic

With your slim figure there's not much you can't wear, so you can afford to be a bit braver when it comes tc hitting those 50 percent off racks.
Do be daring. Go for slinky halternecks, which will divert the eye from a flat bust. Try some wedge heels as they balance skinny ankles and add height, too.

4 Choose clever updates

Look out for up-and-coming trends that will carry you through the seasons. Audrey recommends scouring the rails for soft chiffon, a key fabric for the spring and summer. 'Shades of cream, ivory, ice-white, beige, champagne, caramel, ginger and bluish greys will look gorgeous in chiffon,' she adds.

The military look is still strong for 2006, too. 'But beware – the mandarin collars and straight lines of these garments look better on angular figures not curvier ones,' says Sue. Invest in sumptuous fabrics like velvet, leather and tweed as they're perennially 'in'. 'Be cautious though – tweed and leather can add bulk while velvet can show up bulges. Look at yourself from every angle and get someone impartial to give their opinion.' says Audrey.

5 Do your research

Using the above tips, make a list of your 'must-haves' for the sales and if possible go into your favourite stores beforehand to plan your assault. Newspapers and store websites often announce sales in advance and give you a sneaky insight into what's on offer.

On the day make sure you stick to a pre-planned schedule, stay calm and, where possible, try on your potential purchases to make doubly sure that it's what you want and need. And be clear about the store's returns policy, just in case you do make a sales slip-up.

Audrey's top tips:



* **Make sure your sales bargain is the right colour** If lime green isn't your thing don't buy a jumper in that colour. Similarly, purple is all the rage now, but it may not be next autumn. Play it safe with neutral colours like black, grey and topaz, or colours you know you look great in.
* **Focus on your favourites and go straight for them if they're reduced** It helps to draw up a wish-list of items you've been waiting for – that way you won't buy things just for the sake of it.
* **Target expensive shops** like Hobbs, Phase Eight and Austin Reed as you're likely to find classic good-quality and well-made garments that last for years. To book an appointment with a Colour Me Beautiful consultant, call 020 7627 5211.

Sue's top tips:



* **Don't buy anything prior to the sales unless you MUST have it** If you decide to return it without a receipt, you may be eligible for a refund less than the price you paid.
* **Avoid fashionable or trendy items** unless they're so cheap you can afford to ditch them after one wear.
* **Don't be afraid to ask if something will be reduced** It's horrible if you pay full price and then see it reduced by 50 percent a week later.
* **Set yourself a budget and stick to it.** Then you'll get no nasty surprises in February's post!

Contact Sue Donnelly at www.thebigu.com

TURN OVER! For flattering clothing tricks that defy the years

Photography Ruth Jenkinson, www.motherandbabypicturelibrary.com

>>The best sales tricks



Trousers

Forget turn-ups and tapers – go for tailored says Audrey. She recommends classic trousers in a neutral style and shade to suit all occasions. Again steer clear of high waists and tapered legs. The sales rack will also be lined up with suits, which are always great long-term investments.

Dresses

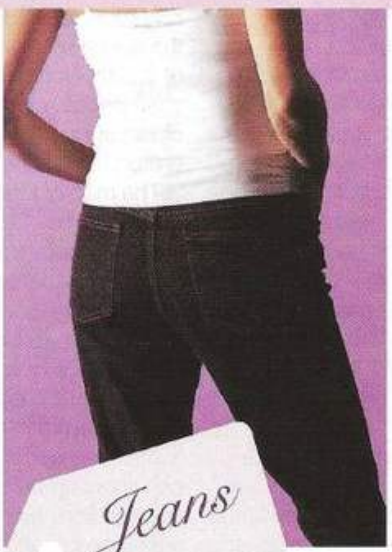
Crossover dresses look sophisticated, and they hide a multitude of sins. They'll draw attention from a saggy tum or boobs, contour the waist and accentuate a flat chest. 'Don't forget the little black dress either – it never goes out of style and can always be accessorised to take it from classic to trendy,' says Audrey.





Shoes

Look out for classic long boots – aside from the short summer months, there isn't a time you can't feasibly wear them. Other great buys are wedge heels – easier to walk in than stilettos plus they detract from thick ankles and big bums, and kitten-heels – a comfortable but still glam alternative to high-heels.



Jeans

Avoid skinny jeans – they may be in vogue, but they only suit ultra-slender, long legged and tall figures. Instead go for straight or boot-cut styles in firm, rather than stretchy fabrics and absolutely avoid high waists. Back pockets draw attention from a less than peachy derrière.



Tops

Timeless sales buys are not glitzy tops, but wardrobe essentials like fitted shirts and t-shirts, and jumpers or cardigans in luxury fabrics like cashmere. Even if you only get a few wears before spring, they'll be just as wearable next year.

Underwear

Use the sales to overhaul your underwear drawer. Well-made and plain smalls are a great investment. Also keep an eye out for intelligent undies like bum-lift pants and waist-enhancing girdles, which will help improve the overall cut of your clothes. HP

